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ABSTRACT

Distance education may be considered in two ways: (1) as a substitute for conventional, face-to-face education; and (2) as a mode of education in its own right. Those who view distance education the first way treat students as members of a class and include a fixed schedule of classes, assignments, and course duration. Those viewing distance education the second way address individual students (not classes) and adapt educational activity not only according to geographical conditions, but also to periods and length of study acceptable to students, student work and family conditions, and student goals. Within the view of distance education as a mode of education in its own right exists the paradoxical combination of mass communication and individualization. This paradox must be kept in mind when considering further development of subject matter, target groups, and methodology in distance education. The development of methodology that strengthens students' autonomy and independence, and that encourages student participation, interaction with the teacher, and responsibility for their own learning, is of primary importance in distance education. (28 references) (DB)

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The concept, basic character and development potentials of distance education

Börje Holmberg

In the usage of the 1980s the term *distance education* covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation. This definition of mine (Holmberg, 1977a: 9, repeated in Holmberg, 1985a: 1) has been widely accepted (cf. Keegan, 1980 whose propositions have been analysed by Bååth, 1981). Even Perry & Rumble's little analytical primer adopts it: 'In the context of education, distance means that the learner and the teacher are not face-to-face. Thus two-way communication must take place despite the fact that they are not in the same room together' (Perry & Rumble, 1988: 1).

Interpretations of the character of distance education

This fairly unanimous interpretation evidently implies that *non-contiguous communication* is the main characteristic of distance education. Both one-way traffic (subject-matter presentation) and two-way taffic (written assignments, essays, telephone and computer interactions) belong here.

So far there thus seems to be little dissent in today's debate. Educators are less certain whether distance education is to be regarded as a mode of education in its own right or simply as a substitute for conventional, face-to-face education, i.e. a vehicle for the distribution of knowledge.[1]

Those who hold the latter view tend to 'treat students as members of a class, although that class is distributed geographically' (Leslie, 1979: 36). Insistence on supplementary face-to-face classes and prescribed pacing, i.e. 'fixed starting times for a course, a fixed schedule of assignments, a fixed duration of a course' (Leslie, ibidem) leading to data or periods being prescribed for each submission of written work, is a typical consequence of looking on distance education as a mere substitute for face-to-face education. It is possible that conventional views of educational planning and organisation induce spokesmen of this school of thought to impose the same restrictions on distance study as is usually unavoidable in traditional study: limited geographical coverage, classes of

limited size, pacing, division of the year into terms of study, regular meetings, prescribed examination dates, vacations etc. To the extent that in systems adopting these limitations the type of distance education applied is felt to be innovative, it is what Ross (1979) calls innovation within the accepted paradigm.

Regarding distance education as a mode of education in its own right has very different consequences. It implies using its full potentials in addressing individual students (not classes), but by developing courses for large target groups. The educational activity is adaptable not only to geographical conditions, but also to the periods and length of the study acceptable to students. Students' ability or willingness to take part in face-to-face session is of little importance. Their inclinations, work and family conditions are the decisive factors. While one student can give twenty hours a week to his/her study, another may have (or wish) to limit the study to three or four hours a week. The individual student thus decides on goals, pacing the length of study. Distance education, as seen as a mode of education in its own right, is evidently a paradoxical combination of mass communication and individualisation.

Both of the approaches discussed occur and are successful, as can be shown by the simple reference to, on the one hand, large-scale distance-teaching correspondence schools, on the other hand the small-scale approach of, for instance, the Australian University of New England. Not only these two types occur, however; so do a number of applications partly resembling either or both of them. Thus most distance-teaching universities, although of the large-scale type, adapt themselves to traditional universities in that they apply terms-and-vacation systems and impose their pacing on students.

Diversity rather than uniformity characterises distance education. Nevertheless the paradox that distance education can include elements of both mass communicaion and individualisation remains a basic characteristic.

Developments potentials

The possibilities open to distance education for further development should be considered from three different view-points, those of learning content, target groups and methodology, all of which inevitably influence the organisation of the work.

Subject matter

The conversational approaches, which seem gradually to have become fairly generally recognised in distance education (Forsythe, 1986;

Holmberg, Schuemer & Obermeirer, 1982), indicate possibilities to make wider use of this mode of education for subject areas suitable for inquiry by argument, discussion and debate. Argumentative presentation is to include and engage the student, who has to read, consider and evaluate positions taken and expounded by champions of the causes being studied. Methods likely to enhance student autonomy are evidently of prime interest here. See below.

While this suggests a widening of the subject areas of distance education in the overlapping affective and cognitive domains, further widening can also be forseen in domains including psychomotor learning.

Thus the use of distance-education methods for learning subjects and skills, for which demonstration of processes is important, will undoubtedly increase as modern technology promises further to facilitate teaching/learning in these areas.

Surgery, engineering and chemical processes are, in fact, more clearly demonstrated by video recordings - which can be repeated any number of times and clarified by freeze-frame procedures until the individual student is satisfied that he/she has followed the process in all its details. The alternative is watching and listening to comments. Laboratory and engineering kits, computer equipment and other material for hands-on exercises have undergone important improvements - which make them excellent tools for the learning of psycho-motor skills.

Most probably these and other developments will contribute to widening the content area of distance education.

Target groups

New content areas will also mean new categories of students.

Irrespective of new developments of this kind, the understanding of the potentials of distance education of the two kinds discussed (as a vehicle of knowledge distribution *VS* as a mode of education in its own right) is being much more widely spread now than a decade or two ago. The success of the Australian small-scale model for so-called dual-mode universities, which caused the introduction of similar systems in parts of Africa (Kaunda, 1970), still exerts strong influence and has even been regarded as a pattern worth following in a European country (Dahllöf, 1976). The large-scale approach sometimes to be identified with the view of distance education as a mode of education in its own right, has, largely, on the basis of the unprecedented success of the British Open University and the large private correspondence schools, led to the creation of some 25 distance-teaching universities and similar organisations in different parts of the world in the 1970s and 1980s. The international interest in

this approach seems to be increasing constantly. Here the potential for growth appears almost unlimited.

It seems possible - and even probable - that distance education will, to an even greater extent then at present, attract students who feel independent and desire much autonomy. There is evidence illustrating two contrasting approaches in this respect, expectancy *vs* promotion of student independence (Bückmann et al., 1985; Holmberg, 1985b: 11-17). Empirical studies carried out in Jugoslavia indicate that distance education is a preferred mode of study among adults who find participation in classes 'repressive' (Krajnc, 1988).

Methods and procedures

It may well be possible to improve the methods of course development and non-contiguous communication further - although much success has already been gained in these respects. Course development, to some extent under the influence of behavioural techniques[2], and non-contiguous communication (sometimes with the help of electronic mail and other kinds of computerised interaction) have by now attained high degrees of teaching-learning effectiveness. Maybe the development to be foreseen here will mainly imply further sophistication of approaches already known.

The main methodological development potentials are, in my view, to be found in the endeavours to exploit and support student autonomy. This implies engaging the students themselves in deliberations and decisions about learning objectives, course contents, sources and procedures to be used. This is a concern that acquires increasing importance the higher the academic level of the study is. However, it is relevant also in fairly elementary study and tentative solutions have been developed (cf. Ljosa & Sandvold, 1983).

The endeavour to strengthen the autonomy of students implicitly includes a wish to make them less dependent on their course authors than they have usually been so far. This is, of course, tantamount to insisting that students should not be encouraged to regard learning merely as acquiring the capacity to provide a number of replies that are correct. This view represents a first, primitive stage which, according to William Perry (1970), ordinary university students give up fairly early. The reason why they do so is that they realise - through varied reading - that in many cases there is no such thing as an answer or solution that is absolutely right. This relativism (stage 2) represents an important experience, on the basis of which students may reach conclusions and positions of their own (stage 3). Perry's study of the three stages of the understanding and application of learning seems important to distance

educators. There is definitely a risk that distance-study courses may degenerate into spoon-feeding or presentation of given truths in larger doses. Developing awareness of problems and of the plausibility of different approaches and solutions, as well as inspiring (or provoking) students to take up positions of their own, is an educational task that academic distance education cannot ignore.

Often, particularly at the university level, students must be made to see a complicated picture of a subject with conflicting theories and views, or they have to learn how to trace facts and arguments from different presentations and to study various sources critically. Evidently a self-contained course, i.e. one that is meant to 'teach' on its own without the support of other texts, is not very suitable in this context. One solution in such cases is to develop a study guide instead of a self-contained course. It is the task of the study guide to cause students to read and/or listen to presentations of various kinds, to compare and criticise them and to try to come to conclusions of their own.

In the cases when students have good library faciliites this is a fairly unproblematic approach; in other cases specially prepared readers containing selected articles and extracts from books will have to replace the sources provided in the library. Reprinting suitable new articles (,with due permission,) is also one way of keeping courses up-to-date.

While procedures of this kind undoubtedly contribute to presenting a plurality of scholarly positions and reveal implicit value judgments, nevertheless a considerable amount of implied direction remains in that readers tend to limit reading to what their authors have found expedient. Even teaching by means of study-guide courses is inevitably to some extent autocratic. Distance teaching may mean 'teacher-centred education, where the media are used as substitutes for the teacher, 'telling' students what they ought to know' (Ljosa, 1977: 79).

The most radical attempt to avoid this autocratic tendency and really to cater for student autonomy is 'contract learning' as practised by Empire State College in the US state of New York (Coughlan, 1980; Worth, 1982), Murdoch University in Western Australia (Marshall 1984), the North East London Polytechnic (Hinds, 1987) and elsewhere. In contract learning an agreement is entered into between a student and a tutor (a 'contract' is made) about a certain curriculum, which the student studies on his/her own but with the contiguous and non-contiguous support of the tutor, and also about the assessment to be applied (examinations, essays, thesis etc.) The learning material may, but as a rule does not, include specially-prepared distance education courses.

> Contract learning under the guidance of an expert in the particular field of study operationalizes the notion of individualization. It allows the mentor to develop educational alternatives responsive to the needs of diverse students and makes available academic programmes appropriate to the full range of motives and orientations toward knowledge and learning processes.(Coughlan, 1980: 3)

Not only the presentation of learning matter but also the non-contiguous communication that is the other constituent element of distance education will be influenced by the attempts to make students problem-conscious, to exploit and support student autonomy. This evidently applies in a general way to the types of assignments given. However, it also means that the communication element is given a more important role than is usually the case. The literature recommended and the whole course can primarily function as support and service of individual search and learning. This is feasible only if by special measures students' individual situations and needs are made to guide the study. One way of doing this is to develop assignment tasks encouraging and requiring students to report fully on their intellectual and professional concerns, so that the tutor can discuss these and refer to relevant literature.

A British (University of Surrey) programme for staff development, aimed at university lecturers in Southern Asia, is interesting in this context. It includes a fairly comprehensive project on a theme chosen by each of the individual course participants from among the concerns each is confronted with at work. There is a strong element of interaction in the form of correspondence between tutor and student. There is thus consistent individualisation, as the aim is to make 'the course particular for each member' (Elton, Oliver & Wray, 1986: 31).

This is brought about by assignments which induce students 'to relate the general to their particular experience' (op.cit., 30). In this way each student strongly influences the content of the study.

I believe methodological developments more geared to furthering the search for knowledge, understanding and explanation rather than further refining teaching, - i.e. the facilitation of acquisition and retention of factual knowledge - should be aimed at. Considering present trends, they are also to be expected. Some work on these concerns has been done. Cf. Burgess, 1977; Lehner & Weingartz, 1985. Today's practice in this respect and the feasibility and potentials of a general application of completely-individualised distance study is being investigated at the FernUniversität in West Germany by Weingartz. Most probably, it is a concern that engages many distance educators all over the world.

Conclusions

It is evident that, on the basis of a common understanding of the distance education concept, alternative interpretations of its character influence practice. The potentials for further developments are considerable. In the author's view, the attempt to promote really academic study rather than mere fact learning and the attempt to make students as autonomous as possible are of particular urgency.

Notes

1 I have looked into this question in my contribution to the ICDE conference book of 1988 (Holmberg, 1988a) and draw on parts of this paper in this presentation.

2 'Few theories have had greater impact on educational thinking and practice than the type of behaviourism represented by Skinner and his followers. This particularly applies to the development of instructional systems of packages, correspondence courses and similar educational products. The stimulus-response theory has been very fruitful in, for instance, inspiring the so-called educational technology and the systems approach. ... Applications can be found ... in various forms of pre-produced study programes, for instance in distance education and study generally (cf. Lehmann, 1968, and Holmberg, 1971). Here there is often little thought of stimuli immediately folowed by in-detail foreseeable responses. On the contrary, the presentation may be based on assumptions of various processes incompatible with dogmatic behaviourism.

What is adopted in such cases is merely a technique. Basing the development of study programmes on analyses of objectives and target groups is the core of this technique. That it is valuable as a practical tool would seem to be evident as long as it is realised that not all study objectives are operational and that a universally applicable media taxonomy is out of reach.' (Holmberg, 1978: 6).

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